

OUTLAWS *of* RAVENHURST

BY

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To

REVEREND MOTHER MARY EDWARDA, S.L.

OUR LEADER

"For God and Our Lady"

Introduction

During the preparation of the *4-Sight Edition* of the *Catholic Authors Series* for Grades 7 to 10, our staff was engaged in selecting authentic literature that clothes truth in the splendor of beauty and, by its inherent perfection, purifies the heart of man, impels the will, and exalts to action.

We read practically all the books by Catholic authors for the junior high school level. We were hard put to find enough artistically valid books for a full-blown reading program. It is incontrovertible that we have a growing number of Catholic authors invincible in their Faith and increasingly indisputable in their art who do not invent escapes from reality but dramatize the seizure of it. We gave their work complete and grateful treatment in *4-Sight*.

But these books were oases. Hundreds of others were unalleviated sand. The number of books that should not have been written is staggering. Laid end to end they should lead from wherever they are to an attic.

In desperation, we dug into our bag of out-of-print books. We remembered *Outlaws of Ravenhurst* from our recent youth. To our delight, we could recall plot, characters, incidents. Now, we opened it again.

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Here was manna in our desert. The men were manly, the women womanly. And the boys were not self-righteous Horners sitting in corners—sugarplums pulling other sugarplums out of a pie and eating them without relish. Here were clean, poignant parallels of Tarsicius and Sebastian and Campion; here were other Christs and other crucifixions—and, yes, here was Judas. Clearly, this was not the work of a hagiographer turned storyteller and perpetrating vicious portraits of the saints as people born with holy water in their veins that immunized them to concupiscence.

Here was struggle between good and evil, beginning in the center of men's hearts and spreading out in concentric, enveloping circles. In miniature was the recurring and current conflict of the world: Christ against antichrist, and the Mother of God recognized in her practiced historic role of saving men in the imminence of their peril and making them strong out of weakness.

What a contrast to the many books full of pasteboard boys and girls threatened by transparent plots of butter-milk villains! What a relief it was to find no invertebrate heroines simpering in synthetic halos, enumerating their novenas to assorted saints with the sweet stoicism of dowagers unveiling their operations, and negotiating lachrymose conversions right and left.

Here were boy and man standing in the full stature of body-spirit, choosing between good and evil and coming to grips with the devil. No secularism here, relegating God to the periphery of grace before big meals. Here Christ in the heart of His Mother was the center—the

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Catholic center of living. These were total Christians living their Faith to the hilt of their claymores. What an exhilarating departure from "how Joe and Harry spent their vacation" circumscribed by a canoe, several unconvincing catfish, and abominable prose—running the emotional gamut from A to B with a narrative temperature that couldn't incubate the egg of a wren.

Furthermore, we had always been saying that a man becomes what he reads: he reads mush and you can pour him through a keyhole; he wrestles with giants and becomes a king. Here, reading a book within a book, the hero meets God's nobility and grows to the stature of early Christians who stood heaven-high in the Colosseum.

The plot cascaded down the jagged rocks of the Highlands, suspense was keyed like a fiddle string, and the people didn't talk like characters in novels. The story had a heart that was warm, palpitating, compassionate, and capable of refreshing indignation.

This was high adventure, indeed. This was a book.

We contacted the author, Sister Imelda. Where could we procure copies of *Outlaws of Ravenhurst*? We were told we couldn't. The book was not in print.

Why hadn't it been reprinted? Publishers had been asked to reprint it but refused to.

But it *must* be reprinted! We'd publish it ourselves—all right? Certainly, delighted, decidedly delighted!

Would she simplify the dialect for youngsters who read while they run the bases, but retain the good smack of Scotch (dialect)? Yes, she had already done that.

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Had she considered telescoping several chapters and poising that twelfth climax on a precipice edge? Very well.

Would she delete a few things that might irritate fastidious critics who write with scalpels? Yes.

Could the story be dropped like a hot iron at the finish? Certainly.

Could we begin at once? At once.

Sister Imelda is delightful.

Here is *Outlaws of Ravenhurst*, revised, reset, illustrated—"for God and Our Lady!"

Truth is compelling when it is realized. It is realized when seen. It is seen when it is embodied, incarnated, actualized. Literature at its best is truth clothed in the splendor of beauty, capable of impelling vacillation from "Not yet, O Lord," to "Now!"

We believe this book to be truth in raiment becoming it.

GEORGE N. SCHUSTER, S.M.

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OUTLAWS OF RAVENHURST

Chapter 1

THE GRAY-CLOAKED STRANGER

NIGHT LAY on the long swelling waves of the Chesapeake Bay: no wind, no star, a murky darkness. The spars of an unlighted ship loomed through the fog and sank into fog again. Stealthily, from the bulky gloom of the deck, a dory slid on oiled ropes to the somber waters. Two seamen followed. Then down the ropes came an object which seemed to be a man with a bundle, wrapped in a long gray cloak. The dory pulled off and was swallowed by the fog.

For an hour the ship swung at anchor, still no light aloft or alow, and no sound save the dull lapping of the waves. Then from the stern a bell began to toll. One slow, booming tone rolled off and died away before the next followed. As if drawn out of the fog by the bell's deep calling, the dory came gliding back again. Two seamen were at the oars. The anchor sobbed up from the sea's grip. The tide was offshore and the ship floated out with the current, unlighted, silent, back into the white smother from which it had come.

Keen and marrow-searching, the morning wind rose

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along the shore of Maryland. Dense fog became a fine, drizzling rain turning to sleet. Breasting it along lonely ways among the sand dunes, hurried a lean, bent man carrying a bundle under his cloak—a long, muddied, threadbare garment as gray as rain-soaked ashes.

The bundle was hard to manage. It seemed to move of its own accord. Once in a while a sound came out of it, a wailing cry, "Dunkie Teewee! Take Dordie out."

"Sh!" the man would whisper. His tone was a stern command, but his eyes glowed with great love. The bundle would snuffle a moment or two, then grow quiet.

After hours of tramping, the man found a nook where the forest met the last sand dunes. Here, crouched between a low bank and a tree, with his own body shielding the bundle from the sleet, the man opened his cloak and loosened the sailcloth and the plaid shawl within. A fat fist slipped out of the opening, then a tousle of brown curls, a gurgling laugh, and a piping voice, "Dood Dunkie Teewee! Take it all off!"

"Hush!" came the man's low command in a tone that would have been menacing except that it was so deeply kind. "Drink." He drew a flask from his cloak.

The child drank, but all the while he stared over the bottle's rim at the man—a wise, wide, baby stare. His eyes were blue and deep as the sea, with a flash in their depths that in the turning of an instant might be fun or fury; just now the eyes shone with a puzzled and half-angry trust.

Even in this short time the little fist which guided the flask was growing blue though it gripped with deft

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strength—a swordsman's right hand still in the making. The stranger hastened to enclose the baby in his warm coverings. He wound the cloak about himself and his bundle, left the shelter, and hurried on through the stinging sleet.

By midafternoon they had reached the top of a rough knob. Here the man seemed to be expecting someone. Placing himself in a spot well screened by the underbrush, he kept a constant eye on a little path which wound around the base of the hill.

It was almost sundown before the expected one arrived, a gentle old man on a steady-going bay horse. His round, low-crowned hat, sober clothing, and great saddlebags gave him the appearance of a missionary passing from one Mass station to another. If the man of the gray cloak was expecting the meeting, this other person evidently was not; yet the stranger studied the missionary's face with a look of recognition and relief. Then, turning sharply, he slipped off in an opposite direction across the hill and down the other side until he reached the path at a point where the horseman must soon pass.

Here the stranger took his queer bundle from beneath his cloak and propped it up against a stump. He loosened the wrappings from the baby's face and pressed upon the little brow one long, long kiss. The child awoke and cried out to him. The gray-cloaked figure whirled and darted up the hill into a thicket. Perhaps he feared the horseman would come before time. Perhaps he could not trust himself further lest he fail to carry out his plan.

The child, left suddenly alone, cried out at first as

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if it were some game; then, cross from weariness, he screamed and struggled with his coverings. At last, as if too weary to battle longer, his voice dropped to a convulsed sobbing, "Dunkie! Dunkie Teewee!"

Far up the slope the stranger knelt between a ledge and a twisted mass of brush and vine. His clenched hands were outstretched on the rock, gripped upon each other till the fingernails bit into the lean flesh. His hollow, weather-furrowed face was set by the clenched will behind it, but his eyes were wet with an agony of love and longing.

Chapter 2

BROWN-HEAD GOES FISHING

TWO BOYS trotted along an old Maryland path. The brown-headed one carried poles and bait. The red-headed one held an old flintlock gun.

"Joel," grumbled the brown-head, "look at this bait. Not a blessed thing but cabbage worms! We won't get a fish till the owl knows when."

"What's bitin' on you, George? That's the best kind. A fish can have white worms any time he wants to nose along the bank, but he doesn't get green ones every day. Anyhow, I had to clean the cabbage pit this morning."

"Yah! I thought you had lazy man's reason."

"'Tisn't either lazy man's reason."

"Redhead's temper's red. Better run or he'll kill me dead," mocked George, leaping over a log and racing downhill.

"You'll take that back!" panted Joel, scrambling after him with the old gun bouncing up and down on his shoulder.

"Like to see you make me!" But George's foot caught in a vine and down he went.

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Joel sprang astride his back and began bouncing up and down, singing, "Take it back!"

"N-n-n-o-ooo-o, I won't!"

"Take it back!"

"I-ii-ee-ii-wo-wwo-ww—wo won't!"

"You've got to! I'll bounce till you do! Ouch! Oh, my foot!" Joel caught his big toe in both hands.

With a wiggle, George was free. "Have to take it back, do I?" He sprang over a log, then paused, for Joel was still hugging his toe. "What's up?"

"Got a splinter in my toe!"

"Cryin' for a splinter! Baby!"

"You'd cry if you had it!"

"Let's see. . . . That's a bee's stinger. Sure it hurts. Here, I'll pull it out for you."

"Ouch!"

"Mud'll take the sting out. Here's some."

"Was it a honeybee or just an old bumble?"

"Honeybee! See him under the violet? Maybe daddy will hunt for the bee tree, Sunday."

"Look, I must have stepped right on him. His wing is broken, and a couple of legs. I don't wonder you stung me back, old buzzer."

"Say, we'd better be going, or we'll get what Paddy gave the drum. You know mother said she didn't send us to go gallivantin' in the woods. She sent us to fish." Then away they went, jumping over logs, dodging under bushes, setting all the blossoming sprays of Maytime dancing in their wake.

They paused, out of breath, on the bank of the stream

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and dropped down on the moss to watch the fish slipping from stone to stone in the pool below.

"Look at that oriole," whispered George. "He is making a twin for himself in the water."

"The pool is a good looking glass to make doubles in," agreed Joel. "Whee, but your face is dirty!"

"So is yours!"

"Nothing else is the same, though. We are the least alike for a pair of twins—"

"Our eyes are the same color."

"Now, look again. Our eyes are blue, but yours are almost black, and mine are like skim milk. Your nose is long and there is a hump in it. Mine turns up at the end. Your jaws are as square as old Dick's bulldog's. Mine—"

"Quack, quack says the crazy duck! I'll pitch you in the creek for callin' me a bulldog." George sat up sharply, turned, and began digging for bait. The subject seemed to irritate him; yet, Brown-head, hunting by a rotted stump for worms, could not have remembered the baby Brown-head propped against that same stump by the gray-cloaked stranger some eight years before.

"I'm glad we're not as much alike as Which and Tother are. I found Which out behind the woodpile crying this morning. Tother stole the cream to feed his cat. Along came mother and spanked Which for it. If we were alike I might get a switchin' every time you need it."

"Would you get a lick amiss?" But Joel suddenly had a greater interest. His eyes were on his wooden bob. Under it went. He jerked the line, then drew in. "Quack

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yourself, old know-it-all! Cabbage worms won't catch fish! Look at this one, will you? Half as long as my arm!"

"Hsst! What's over there in those bushes?"

"Where?"

"The big ones on the other side of those cattails. Watch 'em wiggle! I bet it's that old fox. Daddy said to keep an eye out for him." George reached for the gun. "You won't steal any more of our chickens, old boy."

"Ready?" Joel was picking up a stone. "I'll bring him out for you."

"Let it fly!"

The stone hit the bushes squarely. There was a snarl. The branches parted and out sprang, not a fox, but a large brown bear. She looked up at them, growled, and put one foot in the water. The boys waited for no more but dashed up the bank.

Joel gave a sharp cry. George turned. "What's the matter with you? Quick! She's swimming!"

"I stepped on my fishhook!"

"Pull it out! She's comin'!"

"Can't! It's all the way in!"

"Here! Let me get hold of it!"

"Ow! Don't!"

"You got to stand it! She's halfway over! There, it's out! Come on now!"

"Oh! I can't step! Ow!"

"You've turned your ankle! Lean on me! Hop! She's almost here! Hop! I'll help you!"

"Go on, George, save yourself!"

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"Do you think I'd leave you? Here, try to climb this tree."

"Too little! She can climb. Go on! You can run. Go on, George, quick!"

"Quit cryin'! Climb! I'll boost you!"

At last Joel was astride a crotch in the tree.

George looked at his white face, jerked off both their belts, buckled them together, slipped one end of the strap around Joel's waist, twisted the rest around the limb a couple of times, and fastened it securely. "You can't fall now. Take the gun. You reload it. Fox-shot won't kill bears. Put in all we've got." The gun was a muzzle-loader. One could put in as much powder and shot as needed.

"The bear hasn't come up the bank yet," whispered Joel. "Maybe she'll go downstream."

"No such luck! I've made a mess of it. There's a cub out on that limb."

"Whee! She'll come all right!"

George cut a branch, lopped off the twigs, and tied his knife to it. Then, reaching out, he poked at the cub's feet. The woolly baby whined, snarled, and backed farther out on the branch.

"His mammy hears him. Wow! She's mad!" warned Joel. "Get him down quick."

George gave a swift jab. The cub sprang back, and down he went squalling as he fell from bough to bough and shaking the branches wildly.

George plunged forward, lost his balance, caught himself again, and climbed into the main fork of the tree.

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"She's climbed the bank," whispered Joel. "Do you want the gun?"

"No, wait till she's nearer. I might miss."

"Here she comes!"

The old bear came lumbering toward the tree. Her cub began to crawl to meet her but whimpered and sat down on its woolly haunches. Mother Bruin hurried forward and licked its bruises.

"Maybe she'll go off now."

"No, she won't."

"Hang on tight. Here she comes."

The bear charged the tree with all her force, retreated, and lunged again.

George clung desperately. Joel's wrenched ankle banged back and forth against the trunk until he moaned with pain, but he held the gun tightly and kept the muzzle pointed away from his brother.

Three times the old bear charged the tree. Then she began to climb.

"Quick, Joel! The gun!"

"Good! I've got it."

"Shoot quick! Look how high she is!"

"Might miss."

"Shoot, will you! She's almost up to you!"

"Might miss."

"She'll get your foot! Shoot!"

George was very still. He was looking straight into that great red mouth. He thrust the muzzle against the shining teeth and fired.

There was a roar, a snapping and recoil of branches,



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and a great thud at the base of the tree. Clutching the swaying branches, Joel twisted in his strap to see down through the leaves.

"George! O George!"

No sound came from below.

"Are you hurt?"

Then Joel saw the bleeding pile at the foot of the tree. The bear was on top of George. Both were still.

"George! Wiggle your foot if you hear me."

The bare foot lay still.

"He's dead!" sobbed Joel in helpless misery: the rebound of the tree had left him almost suspended by the straps, and the strain on his waist was making him faint. He struggled back into the crotch again and began searching for the buckles, but they were out of his reach and behind the limb.

"George!" he pleaded. "Wiggle your foot, even your toes, just a little bit."

No movement below.

The silence of the forest closed in upon him, that silence which the noises of the wood-folk make only the more intense: a catbird calling his mate, a woodpecker tapping somewhere across the creek.

Joel struggled with the strap, trying to break it, but the rawhide was too tough.

Helplessness began to numb him. Would help... could help ever come? The folks at home would not think of searching till after supper, and by then...

"O George, wiggle! Kick! Do anything! I can't stand this. You're dead and I'm a-dyin'! I know I am.

BROWN-HEAD GOES FISHING

Things are so black and swimmy and I'm so queer inside. There is no one to help us. No one can even hear us. But God, God can hear us. I forgot."

Then he prayed as he had never dreamed of praying. There was a strange, sweet sense of One unseen but very near. The numbing loneliness was gone.

"That woodpecker keeps tapping all the time. It's such a queer one, too. It goes click-a-clack. Maybe it's a cricket. No. A frog? They don't go like that either. It sounds like chopping. Could it be daddy out in the new clearing?"

Joel made a horn of his hands and called, "Dad! O daddy!" His voice was pitiful and weak.

The sound of the chopping went on steadily.

"He can't hear me." The boy drew a long breath. "O d-a-a-a-d!"

The chopping ceased for a moment, then went on.

"Dad! O-o-o dad!"

Clear above the voices of the woodland came an answering hello. There was silence a while, then a call somewhat nearer. Another call, and then a giant, red-bearded horseman came in sight on the bank beyond the creek.

"Who's there? What's wrong?"

"A bear. It's killed George."

There was a splashing in the creek bottom, a rattle of stones on the bank, and John Abell came crashing through the alders. He sprang from the saddle, threw the body of the bear backward, and passed his hand over the boy's body.

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"Heart's still beating! Thank God! No bones broken. Just stunned, I think. Small thanks to you, Joel. Why didn't you pull the bear off? He is nearly smothered."

"I couldn't, daddy," came Joel's voice weakly. "I couldn't reach the buckles."

John Abell looked up and saw the swollen, bloodstained foot and the white face. "Well, son, are you hurt, too? Did the bear bite you?"

"No, daddy, I hurt my foot."

"Well, you'll have to be a man and stand it a while longer. George needs me more." There was nothing in his tone to show which boy was his son.

Abell lifted Brown-head in his powerful arms and carried him to the pool. As he plunged him into the water, the lad gasped and opened his eyes.

"O dad!" he cried as he caught sight of the red-bearded face. "The bear! She'll get Joel. He can't run."

"That bear won't hurt anybody now."

"Is she dead? Did I hit her?"

"Hit her? You about blew the gizzard out of her. You don't need to fill a gun chock-full even to kill a bear. You blew the gun up, boy."

"Oh, did I break it? And they cost so much!"

"Never mind the cost this time, son. It's the boy I'm thinking about. 'Twas by the mercy of the Lord you didn't blow your own head off, but there's only a small powder burn. We'll say a rosary this night in thanksgiving."

Abell laid the boy on the moss. "I am going back to get Joel now," he said.

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The wounded foot and wrenched ankle were soon bathed and bound.

"What is your old daddy going to do?" laughed Abell. "One dead bear, one live cub, one wounded hunter, and one dead one—they must go home right now. There is only one horse. We'll put the bear across the saddle. Joel can ride behind. Maybe the cub will follow. I'll carry George."

"No, no, daddy, I can walk," announced the "dead" hunter, suddenly sitting up. "I'm not hurt, I just feel shaky inside."

"All the same, I'm going to carry you for a piece. Sure, you think you're as big as a man since you killed a bear all by yourself. I'll carry you with small trouble, but next time you go hunting I'll send to the fort for the army surgeon and the hospital corps to care for the dead and the wounded."